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ABSTRACT

This learning module, which is part of a three-block series intended to help human service workers develop the skills necessary to solve the problems encountered in their daily contact with elderly clients of different cultural backgrounds, deals with communication and adjustment from the standpoint of the way in which elderly Native Canadians view and adjust to death and dying. The primary objective of the module is to identify the cultural issues surrounding Native Canadians' approach and reaction to death and dying. The following topics are discussed in the individual sections of the module: approaches to death and the sprituality that is characteristic of many elderly Native Canadians, family responses to death, reactions to the death of a spouse, and psychological reactions to death among older Native Canadians. A list of selected readings and descriptions of 10 pertinent films are appended. (MN)

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BLOCK B

Cultural Gerontology

MODULE B.4.2

Communication and Adjustment

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Elderly Service Workers' Training Project

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COMMUNICATION AND ADJUSTMENT

MODULE B.4.2

The Elderly Service Workers' Training Project wishes to express appreciation of the following individuals who have contributed to the development of the "Communication and Adjustment" module.

Ms. Patricia Murphy, Cover Design

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INTRODUCTION

Western societies have been so preoccupied with growth and change that personal development and achievement have been overvalued, with a corresponding neglect of old age and terminal behaviour. To the Native culture the terminal stage of life has its own values and rewards, its own peculiar merits, style and form of expertise. It offers an expression of courage, determination, humour and caring. For the Native, death completes the circle of life.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this module, you will be able to:

(1) identify the cultural issues which surround the Native peoples' approach and reaction to death and dying.

The following section will present the cultural issues surrounding Death and Dying, in relation to the Native elderly.

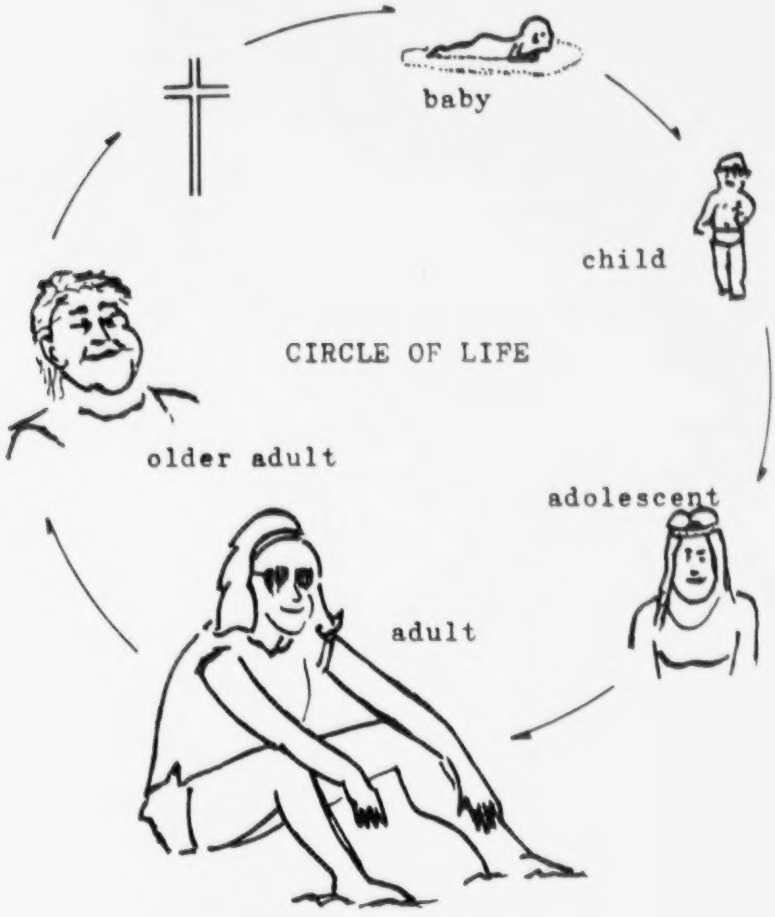
DEATH AND DYING

Upon completion of this section you will be able to identify the cultural issues which surround the Native peoples' approach and reaction to death and dying.

On the one hand, it is not unusual for the Native elderly to accept their impending death in a fairly matter of fact way. The elders are generally reflective of their life and how it is lived. Natives are willing to share their experiences and remember the things their elders taught them. Their past behaviour is measured according to these teachings. The Native elders are a spiritual people. They express their close linkage to the earth, themselves and their grandchildren. Old age is viewed as a completion of the circle of life. All have a remembrance of a being greater than themselves and the elders are very expressive about this.

Native elders who are not mentally impaired cannot help becoming aware that their lifetime is almost at an end. Many of their close friends and next of kin have passed away and the elders realize that they are much

more prone to fatal illnesses or accidents. Thus the idea of death is not unfamiliar and for some at least the prospect is not as threatening.



On the other hand, there are exceptions where Native elders become anxious, depressed or maladjusted. For example, the elders may feel angry at the injustices experienced in their life, express fear of the unknown or become apathetic, confused in the face of a painful

situation outside their control. Such individuals may further feel neglected and alone.

During the terminal stage, Native elders become greatly dependent on others and obviously a great deal can be done by human service workers. The most obvious help is adequate medical and nursing care. However, such help can lose much of its value if it is not firmly embedded in a coherent cultural system in which relevant ethical considerations operate.

The elderly may express the desire to eat duck soup, bannock, tea, berries or other Native food. Native food will usually perk them up. An effort must be made to accommodate their request. Even if they are not well enough to eat, the psychological effect will be felt.

The elders may also recall past experiences in their lives such as the care of children, their homes and their animals. They should be reassured by human service workers that everything is fine. To reminisce with the elderly about the important past events would be to get a glimpse of the life of the elder.

Approaches to Death

Native elderly differ considerably in their reaction to the prospect of dying. Moreover, circumstances colour the situation, and the persons terminal behaviour depends on physical health,

psychological disposition and partly upon the circumstances in which they find themselves. At one time the elderly died in the protective atmosphere of their loved ones at home. They were taken care of by the family and retained their social status and role of advisor until the end of their lives. Those elderly who are able to live out their lives in this kind of setting are indeed fortunate. Their death is shared by all members of the family. The dying individuals feel a certain dignity in their final days. Those, however, who are put in "care" at a retirement home, may find little meaning given to their lives. Still they try to maintain dignity and view death as a normal process in one's life.

Family Responses

The temptation of family members to discourage the acceptance of an inevitable process is indeed great. However, in opposing the Native elders acceptance of death there is a misunderstanding regarding the meaning of death. For example, the family would like to persuade the elder that he or she has many more years of life still left to enjoy. However, the Native elder may feel that he or she has lived a long life and that their time on earth has ended. Generally, they are not so concerned about their own physical pain as the mental

pain caused by their situation to their loved ones. The Native elderly pray for a painless death and the same for their friends. What the elders do get anxious about is the ability of their family to get by without them. The elders want to be reassured that their death will not impose hardship on them and may even express the desire to have the family accept their death. To accompany them on their journey to the other side, the elders may also want prayers said for them.

Death of a Spouse

There are many myths and half truths that seem to be linked to death and the bereaved. One misconception is that a widower survives the ordeal much better than a widow. A man, however, has just as many adjustments to make as a woman. Traditionally, ceremonies were held whereby it was possible for people to express grief in love and for the departed soul. With the ceremony went the unhappiness, faults, failings, bad luck, bitterness, pain, not only of the departed one, but of the family, their tribe, their country, and the world. This was a way of cleansing the human race of some of its burdens. The departed gave this last gift, by sharing the gift of the purifying ceremony with their friends and family. This purifying ceremony helped them travel the road of the dead leading to the spirit world of the

grandfathers. Today, these ceremonies are all but forgotten. The Native elderly mainly follow the European christian teachings and tend to die in hospitals or retirement homes. This is followed by a Christian burial.

The spouse who remains, male or female, finds being alone very difficult. Both have their unique stereotypes to overcome. Males are considered more able to handle grief than women. Tears are not reserved for males alone. Widowers cry just as much and maybe more so in their heart. Tears are an expressive release of emotions. If they are smothered, they will rise up in another form.

Psychological Reaction

People who are terminally ill should never be made to feel, that all hope is gone. These individuals must have a thread to hold on to for as long as they require it. This does not mean extending false hopes and dreams of a miracle. The Native elderly will want to have family around them as much as possible. The elders will want to know that their loved ones are fine - that the young still have a chance.

The Native elderly will recall their past; how they lived their lives, and the hard work they did in their lifetime.

Here is where the worker needs complete sensitivity to the recollection of the Native elderly. The elders

will cry, not out of self-pity but rather for all the things they did not do, did not see and perhaps would have liked to accomplish. Their lives are nearing an end, some will be sick and in pain. The elders will express disappointment that perhaps things did not turn out just right. If asked, these individuals will also give advice to those who will listen.

In short, death is a time of transition. It is a time when one's body is shed for another to meet the great spirit. The Native elder prepares oneself through prayer. A priest or a medicine/spiritual person may be required. Such a person can help gather the strength needed to cross over to the other side. Death may be the last great mystery but it should not be feared, so long as we can act from our hearts in the care of the dying and those who remain.

SUMMARY

The Native elderly generally accept death as a part of the cycle of life. They become reflective about their life and want to be assured that loved ones are fine.

The death of a spouse affects both men and women. These individuals should be allowed to express their sorrow.

It is important that the family and human service workers support the elders who are dying and allow them to share their experiences.

APPENDIX

Selected Readings

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Selected Readings Continued

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Additional Resources

Place: National Film Board of Canada
245 Main St.
Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3C 1A7

Augusta

This film is the portrait of an 88 year old Indian woman who lives alone in a log cabin without running water or electricity. She recalls past times, but lives very much in the present. Self-sufficient, dedicated to her people, she spreads her warmth wherever she moves with her songs, her harmonica and her soft-voiced comments.

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16 minutes, 33 seconds, 106C 0176 178

Circle of the Sun (Le Soleil Perdu)

At the 1961 gathering of the Blood Indians of Alberta the exciting spectacle of the Sun Dance was captured on film for the first time. The film also reflects the predicament of the young generation - those who relinquished their ties with their own people but have not yet found a firm place in a changing world.

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29 minutes 13 seconds, 106C 0161 035

Place: National Film Board of Canada Cont'd

Cree Way

John Murdoch, principal of the Indian Affairs school at Rupert House. James Bay, and his wife Gertie have initiated a curriculum development project using local people and resources. The teaching materials, drawn from Cree folklore, are mainly in Cree and make use of old photographs, artefacts and books that are written and printed in the community. The school year is organized so that pupils have time to go hunting and fishing with their families. This innovative approach makes local control of education a reality in native communities.

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26 minutes, 18 seconds, 106C 0177 155

The Great Spirit

Many of the nearly 300 000 registered Canadian Indians are finding a new sense of solidarity in their traditional beliefs. This film presents a rare glimpse of Canada's native people's sacred places, rituals and ceremonies, as they re-discover their ancient religious heritage and renew their sense of Indian identity.

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27 minutes, 50 seconds, 106C 0178 387

The Land is the Culture

Produced by the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, The Land Is The Culture tells of lands stripped from the Indians, of roads and railways driven through reserves without consultation, and of hunting and fishing conflicts - all of which documents the fact that the Indians' struggle for land claims is not just one of geography or recompense in dollars, but of cultural survival. (Available in Pacific Region only).

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30 Minutes, 106C 0176 313

Additional Resources Cont'd

Place: National Film Board of Canada Cont'd

The Longhouse People (La Grande Maison)

The life and religion of the Longhouse People. We see how the Iroquois of today still maintain a link with a proud past. The film, produced in 1951, shows a rain dance, a healing ceremony and a celebration in honour of a newly chosen chief.

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23 minutes, 2 seconds 106C 0151 012

Mother of Many Children (Mere de tant enfants)

This film is an album of Native womanhood, portraying a once proud matriarchal society which for centuries has been pressured to adopt different standards and customs, but which is now fighting for equal status and opportunity.

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57 minutes, 50 seconds, 106C 0177 518

People of the Sacred Circle

At the Indian Ecumenical Conference in the summer of 1975, signs of discontent emerged: the young demanded changes; the old resisted contemporary pressures; the presence of white film crews grew dark, resentful glances; and the rain fell and fell - an omen some said, from the disapproving gods. The resulting program looks not only at the special events of this yearly week-long study session, but at the internal problems of preserving something called "Indianness".

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27 Minutes, 50 seconds 106C 0176 157

Place: National Film Board of Canada Cont'd

The People of This Land

This is a report on the situation of Canada's native people "south of the 60 degrees" in which economic development of the North, land claims, and social and cultural problems of the Inuit, Indians and Metis are discussed with government officials and native representatives. Host Barbara Frum also looks at the vast land claims made by native peoples in the North; the Inuit, Cree and Dene are determined to get a better political deal than the treaties negotiated with natives in the South.

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86 minutes, 20 seconds 106C 0178 432

Nonoonse Anishinabe Ishichekewin Ka Kanawentank

Each spring, for more than 40 years, 68 year old Nanoonse has crossed Lake Manitoba's fragile ice to tap the delicate maples on sugar island. She always brings along some members of her large extended family so grandchildren and great-grandchildren too can learn, and thereby help to keep alive th Saulteaux traditions of their ancestors.

This quiet and reflective film with soundtrack that features natural sounds, comments by Nanoonse, and minimal voice-over narration, presents a clear picture of the sugaring process but, more importantly, suggests how traditions function as the "cement" that keeps a culture together. The role of women in preserving and transmitting such traditions is also touched upon in two other films about native woman, Augusta and Mother of Many Children.

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10 minutes, 17 seconds, 106C 0680 054

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The Elderly Service Workers' Training Project wishes to express appreciation of the following individuals whose knowledge and expertise in the aging sector has contributed to the overall effort of the Project.

Cultural Task Committee Members

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ELDERLY SERVICE WORKERS' TRAINING PROJECT (ESWTP)

TITLES OF THE TRAINING PROJECT'S MODULES

Block A: Basic Knowledge of Aging Process

A.1 Program Planning for Older Adults **
A.2 Stereotypes of Aging **
A.3 Human Development Aspects of Aging **
A.4 Social Aspects of Aging **
A.5 Physiological Aspects of Aging **
A.6 Death and Bereavement **
A.7 Psychological Aspects of Aging **
A.8 Confusion and the Older Adult **
A.9 Nutrition and the Older Adult **
A.10 Listening and the Older Adult **

Block B: Cultural Gerontology

B.1 Ukrainian Culture **
B.1.1 Communication and Adjustment *
B.1.2 Communication and Adjustment *

B.2 German Culture **
B.2.1 Communication and Adjustment *

B.3 French Culture *
B.3.1 Communication and Adjustment *

B.4 Native Culture *
B.4.1 Communication and Adjustment *
B.4.2 Communication and Adjustment *

Block C: Work Environment

C.1 Work Environment I *

Resource Materials:

Handbook of Selected Case Studies
User's Guide
ESWTP Authoring System
ESWTP Final Report

Please Note:

ALL MODULES ARE AVAILABLE IN THE PRINT FORMAT. THE CODE FOR IDENTIFYING OTHER FORMATS IS LISTED BELOW.

Code	Format
*	Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) Courseware
**	Interactive Video (Tape)/Computer-Assisted Television Courseware